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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire, responded to by 185 Florida State University student teachers, sought to determine the student teachers' needs and their perceptions of who can be of the most assistance during their field experience. Seventy percent of the responses to the first part of the questionnaire named the cooperating teacher as the most significant helper (significant other). Another portion of the questionnaire directed students to identify the qualities of their most significant other. This process yielded four factors or characteristics: supportive, enthusiastic, pleasant, and challenging. Tables display the factor analyses of the characteristics. In a discussion of this data, it is concluded that awareness training for cooperating teachers must be provided to sensitize them to the student teachers' special perceived needs for personal support. Student teachers are preoccupied with personal anxieties and their self image as a teacher. They respond best to cooperating teachers who bring positiveness and enthusiam to their teaching and interpersonal relations. It appears that student teachers need to be challenged by cooperating teachers to their maximum potential as they lend continuously strong emotional support. Student teachers face the same stressors as regular classroom teachers, compounded by inexperience and general anxieties about their future. Therefore, the training and selection of competent humanists as cooperating teachers is crucial. (JD)

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The Cooperating Teacher As Most Significant Other: A Competent Humanist

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The Cooperating Teacher As Most Significant Other: A Competent Humanist

Introduction

What is the most important experience in the education of pre-service teachers? According to authorities in teacher education such as Stratemeyer & Lindsey (1958), Andrews (1964), Conant (1965), Ziechner (1978), and Henry & Beasley (1982), student teaching is the most important experience in a prospective teacher's educational program. Students regard the internship as the culminating experience. Generally they view it as their most successful educational experience. They see the key to this success as being the relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher (Heitzmann & Staropoli, 1975; Karmos & Jacko, 1977; Funk, et al., 1980).

This seems to be verified by an exploratory study at Southern Illinois University which investigated the role of significant others during the student teaching experience (Karmos and Jacko, 1977). The two purposes of the study were: First, to attempt to identify people in the lives of student teachers who were perceived as having a positive influence on their role as a teacher, and second, to determine the nature of the assistance offered. To gather the data an open-ended questionnaire was administered. The student teachers were asked to list five persons who had positively influenced them during their field experience and why.

Of the 60 students surveyed, 34 identified the cooperating teacher as the most significant other. Peers, relatives and other non-professionals ranked second (21) in importance. By grouping the open-ended responses, categories were identified which reflected the influence of this most significant other/cooperating teacher.

The first of these categories reflected a perceived need for various types of emotional support (163 responses), followed by guidance and supervision needs (82), assistance with general teaching methods and subject matter skills (76), and good modeling behaviors (39). It was concluded that the student teacher's greatest needs are for empathy, understanding, and release from the pressures and anxieties of the beginning teacher role. Unless these needs are met mastery of teaching skills are difficult if not impossible to develop.

The Study

The importance of determining student teachers' needs and their perceptions of who can be of the most assistance has been an area of concern at The Florida State University. Through collaboration with the researchers at Southern Illinois University a formal instrument was developed to replicate their two previously asked questions: (1) Who is the most significant other for student teachers?, and (2) Why

are they identified as such?

The questionnaire accordingly had two parts: (1) A listing of seven persons to be ranked from most significant to least significant, and (2) A semantic differential of 27 bipolar adjective pairs to be rated on a seven point differential scale.

The persons listed in the first part were derived from those most frequently reported in the Karmos & Jacko study (1977). They were non-prioritized into the following categories: relative, peer, cooperating teacher, other school personnel, The Florida State University departmental supervisor, The Florida State University area coordinator, and other Florida State University faculty or personnel.

In order to semantically describe the student teacher's significant other, a pool of frequently used descriptors was obtained from open-ended questionnaires previously completed by The Florida State University student teachers for describing their cooperating teachers. Numerous supportive terms were included which reflected the educational philosophies of Carl Rogers (1969) and Art Combs (1965). The principles of Charles Osgood (Snider & Osgood, 1969) were also carefully incorporated into the overall design of the semantic differential. With a descriptive heading of "My Most Significant Other Was..." the 27 adjective pairs were randomly ordered and rotated. See Table 1 for a listing of the adjective pairs and the means and standard deviations of the ratings given by the student teachers.

One hundred eighty-five Florida State University student teachers representing twenty different subject areas of teacher preparation responded to the anonymous questionnaire at the conclusion of the 1980 Spring term. Approximately two-thirds of those students were elementary education majors and one-third secondary education majors.

Findings

The results from the first portion of the questionnaire were similar to the findings of Karmos, & Jacko (1977). Student teachers overwhelmingly named the cooperating teacher as their most significant other. In this case, 130 of 185 or 70% of the respondents ranked the cooperating teacher first. The second place ranking for most significant other was most frequently a peer or relative. University personnel were seldom selected as having significant other status.

The semantic differential portion of the questionnaire was subjected to a factor analysis (rotated varimax method using the computer Statistical Analysis System). This process yielded four factors that described the typical most significant other for each student teacher. Table 2 lists the descriptive terms used; item loadings, and percent of common variance for each factor.

[Insert Tables]

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Items for
The Concept Measured by a Semantic Differential
My Most Significant Other Was:

Item #	Descriptive Terms N = 185	Mean Rating (7 - 1)	Standard Deviation
1	Pleasant - Unpleasant	6.6	.8
2	Interesting - Boring	6.5	.7
3	Challenging - Easy	6.0	1.2
4	Good - Bad	6.6	.6
5	Organized - Disorganized	6.1	1.3
6	Caring - Uncaring	6.7	.6
7	Worthwhile - Worthless	6.7	.6
8	Encouraging - Discouraging	6.7	.6
9	Demanding - Lax	5.3	1.4
10	Competent - Incompetent	6.5	.9
11	Calm - Excitable	4.2	2.1
12	Sensitive - Insensitive	6.1	1.1
13	Fair - Unfair	6.6	.7
14	Colorful - Colorless	6.1	1.1
15	Understanding - Not Understanding	6.5	.9
16	Genuine - False	6.5	1.0
17	Enthusiastic - Unenthusiastic	6.2	1.1
18	Democratic - Dictatorial	5.8	1.4
19	Meaningful - Meaningless	6.5	.7
20	Cooperative - Uncooperative	6.6	.8
21	Unthreatening - Threatening	5.9	1.4
22	Warm - Cold	6.4	1.0
23	Energetic - Sluggish	6.2	1.1
24	Strong - Weak	6.3	.9
25	Accepting - Rejecting	6.5	.8
26	Active - Passive	6.2	1.1
27	Rewarding - Unrewarding	6.4	1.0

Table 2

FOUR FACTORS
Describing the Most Significant Other
Using Rotated Factor Analysis

Item #	Descriptive Term	Loadings	
25	Accepting	.79	
15	Understanding	.71	
13	Fair	.71	
16	Genuine	.68	
27	Rewarding	.67	
6	Caring	.64	
20	Cooperative	.63	FACTOR 1
22	Warm	.62	
12	Sensitive	.62	SUPPORTIVE
18	Democratic	.61	
21	Unthreatening	.55	
19	Meaningful	.52	
7	Worthwhile	.52	
8	Encouraging	.50	
4	Good	.31	
26	Active	.30	
1	Pleasant	.30	
10	Competent	.30	
14	Meaningful	.29	
17	Enthusiastic	.24	
5	Organized	.23	
24	Strong	.19	
23	Energetic	.15	
2	Interesting	.14	
9	Lax	.09	
3	Easy	.05	
11	Calm	.02	

Variance = 43.07%

Table 2 cont'd.

FOUR FACTORS
Describing the Most Significant Other
Using Rotated Factor Analysis

Item #	Descriptive Term	Loadings	
23	Energetic	.80	
24	Strong	.70	
26	Active	.65	
17	Enthusiastic	.63	
14	Colorful	.56	
2	Interesting	.39	
22	Warm	.34	FACTOR 2
27	Rewarding	.33	
18	Democratic	.31	ENTHUSIASTIC
11	Excitable	.27	
19	Meaningful	.24	
10	Competent	.22	
25	Accepting	.22	
3	Challenging	.19	
12	Sensitive	.18	
20	Cooperative	.17	
21	Unthreatening	.17	
16	Dictatorial	.13	
4	Good	.13	
15	Understanding	.13	
8	Encouraging	.11	
9	Demanding	.09	
6	Caring	.07	
5	Organized	.06	
1	Pleasant	.05	
7	Worthwhile	.03	
13	Fair	.03	
			Variance = 21.76%

Table 2 cont'd.

FOUR FACTORS
Describing the Most Significant Other
Using Rotated Factor Analysis

Item #	Descriptive Term	Loadings	
1	Pleasant	.75	
2	Interesting	.74	
4	Good	.55	
19	Meaningful	.51	
7	Worthwhile	.34	
6	Challenging	.33	
14	Colorful	.31	FACTOR 3
22	Warm	.31	
8	Encouraging	.30	PLEASANT
16	Genuine	.28	
6	Caring	.28	
27	Rewarding	.27	
15	Understanding	.27	
24	Strong	.25	
25	Accepting	.19	
23	Energetic	.19	
17	Enthusiastic	.18	
11	Calm	.16	
18	Democratic	.16	
20	Cooperative	.13	
21	Unthreatening	.09	
10	Competent	.05	
13	Fair	.04	
5	Organized	.03	
12	Insensitive	.02	
9	Demanding	.01	
26	Active	.01	

Variance = 18.75

Table 2 cont'd

FOUR FACTORS
Describing the Most Significant Other
Using Rotated Factor Analysis

Item #	Descriptive Term	Loadings	
9	Demanding	.70	
5	Organized	.67	
3	Challenging	.61	
10	Competent	.60	
26	Active	.39	
4	Good	.37	FACTOR 4
7	Worthwhile	.36	CHALLENGING
24	Strong	.24	
13	Fair	.19	
6	Caring	.18	
27	Rewarding	.18	
23	Energetic	.15	
19	Meaningful	.14	
8	Encouraging	.13	
16	Genuine	.12	
2	Interesting	.11	
20	Cooperative	.10	
15	Understanding	.10	
18	Dictatorial	.10	
11	Calm	.07	
14	Colorful	.06	
12	Sensitive	.06	
17	Unenthusiastic	.05	
25	Rejecting	.05	
22	Cold	.04	
21	Threatening	.01	
1	Pleasant	.003	

Variance = 16.39%

The rotated factor analysis of the semantic differential described the most significant other in terms of four general factors. The nature of these individual factors was summarized as: (1) Supportive, (2) Enthusiastic, (3) Pleasant, and (4) Challenging. The relative proportions of variance showed the Supportive factor to be by far the single most important factor containing 43% of the total variance; Factor 2, Enthusiastic showed 22% of the variance; Factor 3, Pleasant equaled 19%; and Factor 4, Challenging yielded 16%.

These results compare favorably with the findings of Karmos & Jacko (1977) where nearly one-half (47%) of the reasons student teachers gave for naming significant others related to the category of Personal Support. Indeed, their study concluded that, "...apparently the beginning teacher's greatest need is for empathy, understanding, and release from the pressures and anxieties of the beginning teacher phase..." and that "...cooperating teachers need to be aware of their influence on the social and emotional acclimation of the student teacher."

Discussion

These data indicate that cooperating teachers can be of greatest help by giving emotional support and guidance to student teachers. This follows logically in that student teachers face the same stressors as regular classroom teachers compounded by inexperience and general anxieties about their future.

Biddle and Thomas (1966) described another anxiety for student teachers as "role pressure" or anxiety associated with fulfilling obligations and expectations of a new role. They have a preoccupation with personal anxieties and their self-image as a teacher. That is, relating their own personality to the dynamics of the classroom, developing self-confidence, class control, being liked by pupils, and being observed and evaluated by supervising teachers and professors. Anxieties expressed by student teachers also frequently focus on their relationships with university and school personnel.

Concerns about effectiveness and competence in new teachers are commonly expressed by legislators, certification agencies, and local school districts but these are not the foremost concerns of student teachers. MacDonald and Zaret (1971) have stated that it is actually late in the first year of teaching before the fledging teacher shares these concerns over competence.

Seventeen years ago Art Combs (1965) in calling for a strong research effort to "arrive at clear definitions of what the perceptual organizations of effective teachers are like..." emphasized that, "whether an individual will be an effective teacher depends upon the nature of their own private world of perceptions." He formally defined effective teachers as "unique human beings who have learned to use themselves effectively and efficiently to carry out their own and society's purposes in the education of others." Combs further stated, "Good teachers are not carbon copies but possess something intensely and personally their own." It is these statements that teacher educators need to remember in facilitating the personal growth and development of effective teachers-to-be.

Carl Rogers (1969) raised consciousness levels regarding the importance of significant others in our lives. From the results of the present study it is evident that student teachers also need significant others and that supervising teachers fulfill this role best by being competent humanists.

Conclusions/Implications

1. Because the cooperating teacher is overwhelmingly the most significant other for a student teacher, awareness training for cooperating teachers must be provided to sensitize them to the student teachers' special perceived needs for personal support.

2. Student teachers have a preoccupation with personal anxities and their self-image as a teacher.

3. Student teachers respond best to cooperating teachers who bring positive enthusiasm to their teaching and interpersonal relations.

4. It appears that student teachers need to be challenged by cooperating teachers to their maximum potential as they lend continuously strong emotional support.

5. Student teachers face the same stressors as regular classroom teachers compounded by inexperience and general anxieties about their future. Therefore, the training and selection of competent humanists as cooperating teachers is crucial.

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